

TRANSIT

68,000 Daily Trips Projected for Purple Line Rail

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Maryland transit officials have determined that riders on a light rail Purple Line between Bethesda and New Carrollton would make up to 68,000 trips daily, a number that supporters said yesterday would only grow as gas prices soar.

This compares with about 260,000 daily trips for Metro's Red Line and 175,000 daily trips for the Orange Line. Dulles Metrorail is projected to have about 85,700 daily boardings in the first phase.

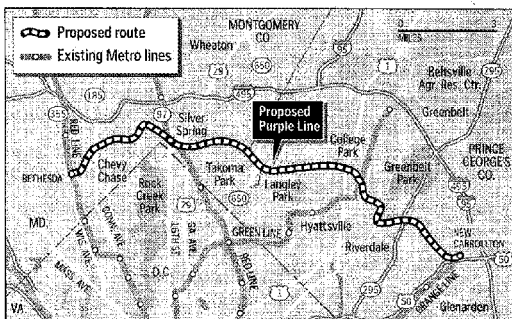
The state's more detailed estimates also show that a 16-mile east-west Purple Line would reduce travel times, particularly for people stuck on slow and unreliable buses to get to places the Metrorail system doesn't reach.

For example, in 2030, the most expensive light rail proposal would provide a nine-minute ride between Bethesda and Silver Spring, according to the state's draft environmental impact study. The ride between Bethesda and the University of Maryland Campus Center would take 30 minutes, with stops in such areas as east Silver Spring and Langley Park, which now rely on bus service.

State officials say their ridership and travel-time projections, as well as the estimated cost of up to \$1.75 billion, would make the Purple Line competitive with transit proposals from across the country when it vies for a limited pool of federal transit funds. Projects are judged primarily on cost-effectiveness, or whether they would save enough people enough time to be worth the investment.

"It clearly compares very favorably," said Michael D. Madden, the Maryland Transit Administration's

East-West Connection



project manager on the Purple Line study.

Madden said the state expects to wrap up its impact study in August, hold public hearings in the fall and make a final decision on the type of system — light rail or bus rapid transit — and the route by early next year. It would then submit its choice to the Federal Transit Administration for review. The line would have about two-dozen stops and be primarily above ground.

Madden said planners recently increased all daily ridership estimates by 20,000 to take into account potential Purple Line trips made by Metro and MARC riders.

Purple Line supporters are using the escalating gas prices as the latest argument for the project. State officials said their ridership projections did not consider rising fuel prices.

"We can't wait as the price of gas averages almost \$4 per gallon with no end in sight," Montgomery

County Council member Valerie Ervin (D-Silver Spring) said at a news conference yesterday at the Silver Spring MARC station.

A dozen local and state politicians from Montgomery and Prince George's counties, some wearing purple ties or lavender blazers, said the project would relieve traffic congestion and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Several also noted "social justice" benefits, saying it would provide better service to lower-income workers who can't afford cars and rely on buses.

"The people I represent — the Latinos taking all those buses — don't have alternatives," Del. Ana Sol Gutierrez (D-Montgomery) said. "They're taking three to four buses to get to jobs. We all know the affordable housing is on this end of the Purple Line, and all the jobs are on the other end."

The state's findings show vast differences in the costs and benefits of seven options. For instance, buses would run in regular traffic

under the cheaper bus rapid transit option, while more expensive options would have buses in dedicated lanes and in tunnels under busy intersections.

The cheapest bus rapid transit option would cost \$420 million to \$460 million, attract up to 40,000 trips daily and take 66 minutes to travel between Bethesda and the University of Maryland at College Park. At up to \$1.27 billion, the cheapest light rail line would have up to 59,500 trips daily and take 38 minutes for the same trip.

Sam Schwartz, a New York consultant hired by the town of Chevy Chase, recently determined that the state had not sufficiently studied running rapid buses along Jones Bridge Road, which would spare the Capital Crescent Trail. The popular biking-and-walking path, which is a key point of contention, runs past back yards in Chevy Chase and East Bethesda.

"A [bus rapid transit] system could accomplish a great deal at a fraction of the cost of a light rail system," Schwartz said yesterday.

Although supporters say a Purple Line would relieve congestion, Madden said that was not one of the project's primary objectives. Eighty percent of trips on a light rail Purple Line would be taken by people who already take transit, according to the study.

One of the project's main purposes would be to provide a link between Maryland's ends of Metro's Red, Green and Orange lines with MARC and Amtrak stations. It would allow rail riders to travel between Montgomery and Prince George's without having to go through downtown Washington. Unlike many suburban Metro stations, most Purple Line stops would have no parking.